

QUIESCENT

A Thesis

by

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This thesis meets the standards for scope and quality of
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and is hereby approved.

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ABSTRACT

Quiescent refers to a state or period of inactivity or dormancy. This exhibition is centered around the complexity and nuance of the face to convey emotion. The concept for this body of work grew during a period of my life where I was feeling very uncertain, as though I was emotionally frozen and dormant. I was conflicted in how to approach life-changing decisions, unsure as to whether their outcomes would metaphorically move me forward or back. This was compounded by fears we all have when forced to confront the confines of our own existence.

The exhibition presents a series of expressively sculpted heads to reflect the progression of my emotional self, through experiences of personal struggle, social upheaval, and the global effects of COVID-19. Their expressions do not repress, they exhibit a range of nuanced emotions including longing, disdain, or exhaustion, all familiar feelings towards the unknown. Empathy is the vehicle through which these works connect to the viewer.

My process relies heavily on intuition. These pieces are intuitively sculpted and intuitively arranged. This method correlates to the inspiration for the work, relationships are driven by intuition as well.

DEDICATION

For Tina and Peggy

Your support is what got me through this.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Louis Katz, and my committee members, Ryan O'Malley and Margaret Aubrey, for their guidance and support.

Special thanks to Cassie White for helping me navigate through my exhibition install, and Gail Busch for giving advice when needed. Thanks to the K Space Contemporary staff for helping tie the exhibition together. Thanks to my fellow graduate students, in particular Jaqueline Negreros, for emotional support as she was going through the same experience.

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INTRODUCTION

In life we are faced with many expectations as we navigate relationships with others. We are expected to be productive, successful, kind, and engaging. Whether romantic or platonic, we must learn how to maintain bonds with people we choose to care for.

I began making figurative work after attending NCECA in 2019, the premier international conference for ceramic arts. As I participated in programming, I found I was not having the experience I expected as it was difficult to build substantive networking relationships with other artists. Despite being a sociable person, I was disheartened at how resistant people were to develop new connections or friendships, instead isolating themselves within familiar groups. It seemed attendees were there to spend time with their friends rather than professional development. I left the conference hungry to be seen, motivated to connect with other people. When I returned to the studio I began a new phase of my art practice, an intensive study of figurative sculpture. My initial explorations were with functional ceramic ware, however, I was compelled to develop a new means of emotional expression through figurative works. I revere sculpture as an elevated form of expression and once I made the decision to pursue it, I didn't look back.

Quiescent is comprised of a series of female heads, sculpted in clay and finished with a cold treatment instead of glaze, and arranged in the gallery with considerable space between each individual piece. I choose solely to work with the head to allow the viewer to focus purely on facial expressions and not be distracted by the body.

THE FIGURE AND FACE

The face is the primary way to convey emotion between people. Throughout history, there are many examples of intentional emphasis on the face. Ancient death masks (Fig. 1) are castings that record a person's visage before internment and had a significant impact on the evolution of art.

“The masks had a tremendous influence on the painting and sculpture of the quattrocento, and the expanded popularity of death masks must be seen in direct relation to the renewed interest in all forms of portraiture. The distinctive distortions of the masks can be found transcribed in the marble faces belonging to effigies of famed Humanists that are the center of monuments to these persons' virtue and learning, as opposed to royalty or holiness.”¹

These masks capture the individual with their eyes closed in a solemn state after death, exhibiting a stillness that also underpins the works in this exhibition. The heads in the show, although some cast with open eyes, resemble death masks as they are records of specific moments. Yet these present a variety of emotions in life, rather than the absence of emotion. (Fig. 2). Despite their expressive nature, they are also ambiguous; one cannot distinguish if life is being breathed into them or out.

The focus on the face is very important. As stated in an article on HHS Public Manuscript, “Facial emotional expressions are salient social cues in everyday interaction. Behavioral data suggest that human facial expressions communicate both the emotional state of

¹ Jane Schuyler, “Death Masks In Quattrocento Florence,” *Notes in the History of Art* 5, no. 4 (1986): 1–6.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23202222>

the poser and behavioral intentions, or action demands to the perceiver.”² Our engagement with faces is automatic, movements of our own faces are primarily subconscious, and our understanding of other people’s facial expressions also occurs intuitively.

The emotional expressions of the figures anchor this exhibition. The face is the conduit for communication, particularly nonverbal cues. The female face is more reflective of my own expressions, as I acknowledge societal pressures of women to maintain composure. These heads defy those expectations; they are expressive and hypersensitive. They aren’t based upon any specific individuals, nor are they exactly self-portraits, rather they are each sculpted to signify a different emotional gesture. Their expressions were not predetermined; they vary depending on awareness and presence with my emotional state during each brief period in which they were sculpted. My handling of their appearance is loose and expressive to generate movement and tension, often creating ambiguity that falls between displeasure, pain, stillness, and acceptance. They are meant to elicit an empathetic response as they meet each viewer.

The exhibition is comprised of 11 individually presented pieces with full sculpted heads, and one grouping of 26 smaller faces. For the individual works, I created the heads nearly life sized, hung on wall at an approximate eye level to directly engage the viewer in an interpersonal exchange. Isolating each head is an important compositional device because as we interact with individuals, we often examine their faces first. As we grow deep in conversation, we tend to watch expressions to interpret our interaction more carefully. There is an evident stillness within each piece, perhaps even calmness, even though the expressions may appear strained. However,

² Eva-Maria Seidel et al. “The impact of facial emotional expressions on behavioral tendencies in women and men.” *Journal of experimental psychology. Human perception and performance* vol. 36,2 (2010): 500-7. doi:10.1037/a0018169

the smaller, gesturally sculpted heads focus less on the individual, rather, each quietly competes for attention in a forbearing manner.

I sculpted these pieces to maximize engagement so each face can elicit an empathetic connection with the viewer. This concept is influenced by the contemporary sculptor Christina Cordova. “I feel my work performs in different layers,” she says. “The most accessible are the ones that have to do with overt figuration, an in-your-face expression through gesture and scale. When you peel down, there are subtleties and color and symbolism, still quite universal but more embedded. And if you keep peeling down, eventually you’ll get to a level that is very close to my sense of culture – and very specific to that culture.”³

The colors on the sculptures are somewhat muted, but still realistic enough to be recognized as lifelike. The faces are female, connecting them to myself. The elements of nature around the heads are symbols of our everchanging, even when we feel we are stuck. The world continues to move on.

³ Lovelace, Joyce. "The Body Eloquent." *American Craft Council*. 2012. Web. 2022.

CLAY AND INTUITION

My process relies heavily on intuition. These pieces are intuitively sculpted and arranged, synchronously with the relationships of which they are derived. I seek to understand other people, their personalities, tendencies, and intentions through intuition, and I rely heavily on that perceptive ability. The intuitive process borders on automatism.⁴ Much of my decision-making while sculpting happens without definitive outcomes or determinant reasoning to the process. It is simply driven by inherently knowing that I am present. This is what is channeled into the material.

When I am sculpting a head, I am not necessarily present in terms of knowing how I am feeling when I begin. I am not thinking about my emotion at the time, it just fluidly starts to form. The success of each piece is not measured by its ability to capture a particular emotion. What defines a successful piece for me is formal balance – if the face looks proportional or if the features, hair, wrinkles, or expressions look realistic. I try to maintain a gestural surface that shows the process, (Fig. 3) implying the importance of seeing my hand in the work is to highlight the special connection I have with the material and each piece as an individual. The use of clay allows for a freedom that cannot be obtained while using other materials.

I'm attracted to traditional aspects of clay. It comes from the earth and can be easily molded by one's hand. When we are touching clay, it as if we are connected to the world. I'm using ceramics as a form of poetry to tell a story with as much brevity as possible. As Albert Jacquemart states, "Clay, from its plastic nature, lends itself to the idea of modelling, and gives scope alike to the liveliest flights of imagination and the most persevering efforts of industry.

⁴ Refers to involuntary actions like breathing, swallowing, etc. A note can be made about surrealist painters using a transcendental-like state to create their works.

Abundant in its variety, easily procured, and consequently, devoid of intrinsic worth, it derives its value solely from the elegance of form imposed upon it by the potter, or from the richness of decoration given to it by the artist.”⁵

There is magic in the malleability of clay, both organic and intuitive. It starts off as just an indeterminate mass, and as you pinch and pull it becomes dimensional and intentional. The materials go through a transformation, formally and chemically, to arrive at their final state. They transition from dynamic and fluid to static and rigid. They commit to their form.

Louis Katz describes the formal process as “something so hopeful, forward looking, progressive, about looking at a stacked kiln waiting to be fired, to be more, to acquire beauty, function, durability. The transformation from mud to stone, it is the primary transformation of its kind, the making of something new from mundane material.”⁶

I sculpt expressively to showcase my connection to the clay. Expressive renderings of the figure have been a precedent throughout Modern Art. Auguste Rodin considered the founder of modern sculpture, turned away from traditions of refinement, rather than classical renderings which made figures appear static and lifeless. (Fig. 4)

This aesthetic is particularly evident in the hair of my figures, as the clay is manipulated in loose and light, dynamic forms. My career in ceramics began with functional pottery. I started by creating mugs, carving on them, and learning about different glazes and surface treatments. Gradually, my functional wares began to have hints of sculptural elements within them. Instead of throwing my mugs, I began hand-building them by slowly coiling or using a pinching technique to form the walls. As I enrolled in graduate school, I committed to fully investigating

⁵ Jacquemart, Albert. “History of the Ceramic Art.”, page 1. Self Reliance Books, 1877.

⁶ Conversation with Louis Katz

figurative sculpture in ceramics, applying my deep knowledge of materials and techniques to an unexplored form.

SURFACE

When I complete sculpting a form and leave it until it is bone dry, the clay is in its most fragile and vulnerable state. At this point I carefully paint terra sigillata over the whole surface. Terra sigillata, which means “sealed earth” in Latin, is a traditional material for decorating ceramic surfaces and is derived from the clay itself. It has been used as a surface all over the world and well before glazes were the predominant surface treatment.⁷ I chose terra sigillata as the initial layer because it seals the clay, making it less porous, like a glaze, but it gives the work a distinct, satin finish. It mimics a fleshy appearance, which is necessary for the pieces to look more natural.

Surface treatment for ceramic forms is a difficult task as it intersects aesthetics with complex understanding of chemistry, heat, and atmosphere. The ceramic artist must develop an eye for anticipating how a treatment or decoration will fit a particular form once fired. Different surface treatments such as glazes, washes, and oxides can greatly alter a work and impact intent. My works are partly influenced by the surface treatments of Baroque and Rococo ceramic ware. The overtly emotional facial features and gravity defying poses make for dramatic, opulent pieces which look natural but unnatural at the same time. By treating the surfaces of my work with a mixture of matte and glossy finishes, I am trying to create depth using natural colors to bring in the illusion of reality, but expressive forms give the sense of fantasy. Using a mixture of historical techniques allows me to achieve complexity and control the surface and color with nuance. In these cases, the color creates dimension, but the emphasis is on the surface quality, the soft, lustrous light creates an attractive, supple surface. (Fig. 5)

⁷ *Medieval Vestige in Provence and Languedoc*, 1st ed., 29–34. University of California Press, 2009.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pnjdp.8>.

The significance of having dreamy, soft-colored sculptures with a hint of a flushed appearance is to not make them overtly hyper-realistic, rather to impart lifelike qualities upon them. Surface treatment is a significant element to ceramics because it creates more depth, it is not merely for decoration. The material always has significance, the process or history can inform the piece as much as the colors themselves. Work that is overtly decorative inherently implies the “feminine touch.” The colors that are used to glaze or treat a surface can even alter the tone of a piece, whether it is feminine or masculine, as determined by cultural norms that are reflected in those decisions.

PLANTS

Plants represent calm, consistency, steadiness, and slow-moving non-aggression. They are passive anchors. The dainty plants are a way to enhance the representation of the fragility of emotions. Compositionally, tiny flowers and leaves are placed in a fluid and organic manner to create atmosphere around the sculptures. They activate the space around each piece, expanding their dimensions beyond the figurative focal point. (Fig. 6) They additionally serve as a metaphor for a changing environment, used to convey things around us that are not consistent, a passing of emotions like the seasons.

The types of plants I create are what exist around me, particularly within my own backyard. Consisting mainly of tropical leaves and succulents, they show a diverse ecology. Their integration with the figures depicts a longing to return to a perceived environment– nature as a means of sanctuary. Nature helps me understand my mental state and harmonize with my surroundings. The leaves and flowers are placed around the heads as a compositional device to direct the eye, to create space and openness, not with intention of framing or enclosure. They appear fleeting, dynamic not static, resembling our shared relationship with the natural environment. They are not a set metaphor, rather they are open to depict thoughts, memories, emotions, or simply the breeze. The gold lustered surfaces (Fig. 7) add to this ambiguity, dissociating from familiar plant matter and implying preciousness, scarcity, and value.

THE EXHIBITION

An aura of stillness permeates the gallery. The work is installed with as much consideration for the space between the elements as there is for their placement. The careful use of negative space makes the viewer aware of their own presence. The heads emerge from the walls and pedestals because of the lack of a body. (Fig. 8) Each is installed using a wooden bracket keeping them at a consistent eye level. This is the most direct means for the viewer to connect with the figures, an immediate recognition of the intimate one-to-one relationship between the eyes of the viewer and each sculpture. (Fig. 9) In support of that notion, space enacts isolation, so the faces communicate with the view rather than between one another to further an empathetic response. As the viewer transitions between the works, they are asked to identify the emotional state of each expression. This is furthered in that each piece is left untitled.

CONCLUSION

This exhibition, though at times seeming like it would never come to fruition, manifested in a way that brought me contentment. Seeing all the pieces displayed together in a large space made me realize that I could accomplish more than I think, but it also left me craving more. I am left with a sense of motivation. I want to work diligently to continue my practice, refine my technique, study harder, and continue to improve.

FIGURES



Figure 1: *Brunelleschi's Death Mask*, Museo dell' Opera del Duomo, Florence, 1446



Figure 2: *Untitled (detail)*, stoneware, terra sigillata, mixed media, 2022



Figure 3: *Untitled*, stoneware, terra sigillata, mixed media, 2022



Figure 4: Auguste Rodin, *Assemblage: Mask of Camille Claudel and Left Hand of Pierre De Wissant*, plaster, 1895



Figure 5: *Untitled (detail)*, stoneware, terra sigillata, mixed media, 2022



Figure 6: *Untitled*, stoneware, terra sigillata, mixed media, 2022



Figure 7: *Floral Arrangements (detail)*, stoneware, gold luster, glaze, 2022

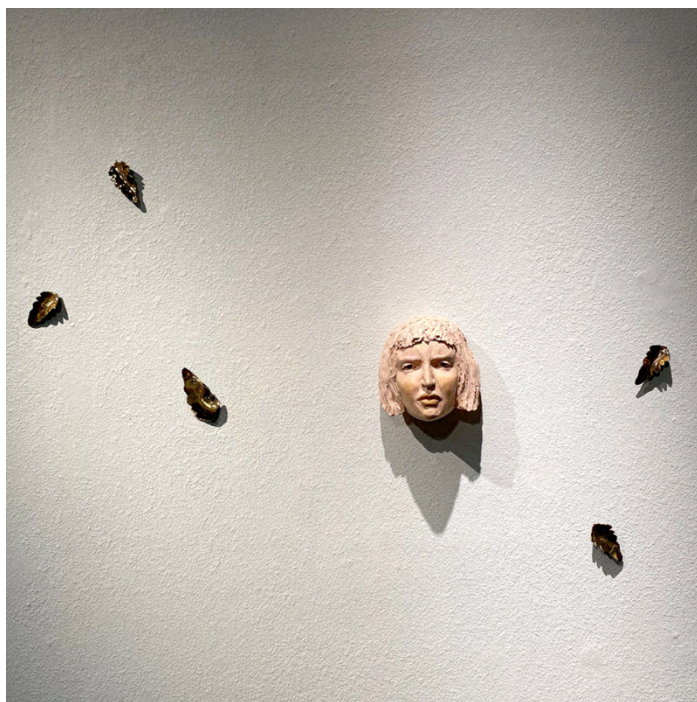


Figure 8: *Untitled*, stoneware, terra sigillata, mixed media, 2022



Figure 9: *Untitled (detail)*, stoneware, terra sigillata, mixed media, 2022

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